DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 116 CG 020 049

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TITLE Academia and Agency: An Analysis of Social Work Practicum Experiences.
PUB DATE Sep 84
NOTE 27p.
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PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *College Role; *Educational Cooperation; Experiential Learning; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Practicums; Practicum Supervision; *Social Work; Student Evaluation; Supervisors; *Teacher Attitudes; Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Social work education requires a relationship between academia and agency. The practicum has long been used to give students a balanced education. To study the perceptions of practicum field instructors about the school's graduate level practicum, questionnaires were sent to 163 field instructors for the University of Georgia's School of Social Work. The results from the 67 respondents (representing a 41% return rate) revealed that, concerning their relationship to the school, over two-thirds of respondents reported having participated in an orientation to the practicum and 88% indicated that they knew the practicum objectives. Concerning student preparation, 57% reported that students they had worked with were prepared for the practicum. Respondents identified 24 distinct areas of knowledge and skills that students should have, giving high priority to interviewing skills and knowledge of human development and behavior. In the area of student evaluation, 58 respondents reported having sufficient information for valid assessments of their students, with data being obtained through conferences, observation, tapes, written recordings, student self-evaluations, and meetings with faculty liaisons. Concerning the role of the faculty and the school, respondents called for greater assistance from faculty on helping to define individualized educational goals, in being more accessible, on demonstrating knowledge of practice settings, and in being able to assist in the integration of theory and practice. (NB)

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ED284116

Academia and Agency

An Analysis of Social Work Practicum Experiences

Howard V. Epstein

September 1984

CG 020049

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This paper was prepared using data gathered during my association with the University of Georgia School of Social Work. It represents an ongoing commitment to curriculum analysis and planning. The core of any social work curriculum, undergraduate or graduate, is the practicum. This is the essential component of professional social work education that must be orchestrated to relate theory and practice. The information was gathered from social workers who acted as field instructors. Although some of the responses may be specific to one university, this paper was written with the view that the results of the research could provide guidelines for other institutions of higher education involved and dedicated to excellence in social work education.

Howard V. Epstein

An essential dimension of contemporary social work education is in the relationship between academia and agency. The very nature of social work as a practice oriented profession has dictated the need for this relationship. The guidelines for accrediting programs of social work as formulated by the Council on Social Work Education leave no doubt as to the mandate for schools of social work to interact with the social work practice community.

An inherent viable point of contact between social work educators and social work practitioners is through the practicum. Historically, social work education has viewed the practicum as the core, the pivotal fulcrum for giving students the richness and reality of a professionally focused education. This practice component of social work education has undergone many changes through the years of formally delivered social work education. The state of the practicum has been affected by many influences, not-the-least, the historical perception that practice is work. Under the title of field work, practicum were orchestrated within a curriculum with the view that time spent in agencies was for the students just an extention of work. With increasing frequency attention is called to the fact that a practicum, like all other component that demands preciseness of design with clarity of performance and learning objectives, desirable if not appropriate activities and a compendium of expectations that can be measured, to identify degrees of learning.

If the social work practicum is enhanced by the relationship between academia and agency, it can be further enriched by an open dialogue with those who would serve as field instructors. This, in essence, was the assumption underlying the orchestration of this study.

During the Fall Quarter, 1983, the Board of the Alumni Association of the University of Georgia School of Social Work voiced its concern about the preparation of students for the practicum and the nature of relationships between faculty and field instructors. It should be noted that this Alumni Board is composed of dedicated professionals, many who serve as field instructors, who have actively engaged with the School in reacting to and advising about curriculum developments and administrative decisions. In response to this continuing interest in assisting the School of Social Work, the Alumni Board proposed the development of a survey to study the perception of field instructors about the status of the School's practicum.

An extensive questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent to the 163 field instructors listed by the School as either active or inactive. The results which are presented in this report summarize a vast range of information based upon the varied responses by 67 of these 163 field instructors, representing a 41% return rate.

Characteristics of Field Instructors

Those who serve as field instructors reflect a range of characteristics (Table 1). The University of Georgia School of

Table 1

Frequency Table: General Characteristics of Field Instructors (N=67)

Variables	Frequency	
	Relative Frequency	Central Tendency
Years as Field Instructor	1 year = 23%	Mean = 5
	2 years = 16%	Mode = 1
	3 years = 11%	
Range of Years as Field Instructor	1-19 years	
Accumulative number of students	1 student = 25%	Mean = 7.7
supervised	2 students = 22%	Mode = 1
	3 students = 12%	
Field Instructor for Other Schools		
Social Work	15%	
Other Professional Schools	16.4%	

Social Work has been in existence for 20 years and it is interesting to note that one of the respondents has served as a field instructor since the first class entered the practicum. Most have been field instructors for five years although the majority (23%) have only been active field instructors for one year. Most have provided educational supervision for one or two students through the years, although the mean for all 67 responding is five students. These practitioners also serve as field instructors for schools of social work from other universities as well as for students in other programs of study requiring practicum.

Field instructors reflect a variety of orientations which affect their own expectations and approach to field instruction. These theoretical orientations are determined not only by the field instructors' own educational background, but years of practice. In Table 2, the range of these orientations is presented with deference to the fact that many have identified with more than one such theoretical orientation.

Relationship to School

A vital question which precipitated this study was couched in a variety of terms, but essentially was directed to understanding how the School fulfilled its obligations to the field instructors through interpretations and materials. Table 3 records some of these critical dimensions.

With various frequency and with various styles (individual

Table 2

Frequency Table: Theoretical Orientations of Field Instructors (N=67)

Variables	Frequency
Ego Psychology	29.9%
Eclectic	28.4%
Family	17.9%
Systems	26.9%
Clinical Casework	10.4%
Behavioral	9%
Task Centered	1.5%
Psycho-social	7.5%
Group Work	4.5%

Table 3

Frequency Table: Field Instructor-Liaison Relationship (N=67)

Variables	Frequency
Field instructor participated in orientation to field instruction:	
Yes	67%
No	33%
Liaison role defined for field instructors:	
Yes	97%
No	1.5%
No response	1.5%
Frequency of meetings with liaison:	
1 time per quarter	35.8%
2 times per quarter	43.3%
Other	20.9%
3 times per quarter	
2 times per month	
Field instructors received course outlines and reading lists	
Yes	40.3%
No	50.7%
No answer	9%

Table 3 (continued)

Variables	Frequency
From students	1.5%
From liaisons	3%
From handbook/or at field instructor	3%
Other	16.4%
Field instructors know objectives of practicum	
Yes	52.2%
No	41.8%
No answer	6%
Given a copy of field instructors handbook	
Yes	77.6%
No	20.9%
No answer	1.5%

and/or group conferences) orientation to field instruction provided a variety of linkages between the field instructor and the faculty liaison--and thus, a connection between agency and school. Over two-thirds of the field instructors have participated in an orientation to the School's practicum while one-third have not. Faculty members are assigned as liaisons to various agencies to facilitate communication with the agency and provide needed educational and administrative supports for both student and field instructor. For the vast majority, this role of the faculty liaison was defined (Table 3).

During the course of an academic term (usually a 10-12 week quarter) faculty liaisons interact with students and field instructors in a variety of ways. Actual contact between liaison and field instructor varies. The majority (43.3%) reports two meetings per quarter followed by those (35.8%) who met once a quarter. One fifth of those who participated in this survey reported variations of such frequencies, plus introduced the fact that contact between faculty liaison and field instructor may be by telephone as well as in person (Table 3).

Over half of the field instructors had never received any course outlines or reading lists. The sources providing these basic teaching materials varied, including a 16.4% indicating undefined "others" (Table 3).

Fifty-nine (88.1%) of the field instructors indicated they knew the objectives of the practicum and 35 (52.2%) acknowledged

they knew both the content and sequence of courses, although 28 (41.8%) did not. Also 52 (77.6%) had received the Field Instructor's Handbook, which includes practicum syllabi and a range of forms and interpretative materials needed to be a field instructor (Table 3).

Students Preparation

An inherent area of interest echoed by field instructors has been related to the degree and type of knowledge and skill base students have which prepared them for the "hands-on" experiences of the practicum. Table 4 summarizes 67 field instructors' assessment of students' understanding of six basic cognitive and skill areas in client-focused social work. The tabulations portray an uneven balance between "good" and "not sure" with communication skills only gaining a higher rating (12%). Attention should also be given to the cumulative totals of "inadequate" and "very inadequate" on all areas but human behavior.

Given the assessment of areas of understanding in the previous section, it can be helpful to look at how the field instructors viewed the students in relation to theoretical cognitive perspectives which serve as an inherent base for social work practice (Table 5). Fifty-four percent replied that students had some type of theoretical base of information while 30% suggested students did not have identified or recognizable cognitive perspectives. Sixteen percent gave no response to this area. Eight areas were initially identified. Of these, systems theory, ego psychology and family systems were identified as dominant

Table 4

Frequency Table: Perceived Theoretical Bases of Students' Information

Variables	Frequency					
	Excel-lent	Good	Not Sure	Inade-quate	Very inade-quate	No re-sponse
Field instructors' assess-ment of students' under-standing of:						
Human behavior	6%	49%	91%	21%	0%	14.9%
Groups	3%	27%	25%	28%	9%	7.5%
Interviewing	8%	51%	12%	19%	2%	9%
Communication Skills	12%	51%	10%	19%	1.5%	6%
Family Systems	0%	40%	28%	16%	10.4%	5%
Psychosocial assessment	2%	28%	28%	25%	7%	9%

Table 5

Frequency Table: Theoretical Perspectives of Field Instructors (N=67)

Variables	Frequency
Systems Theory	17.9%
Ego Psychology	13.4%
Family Systems	10.4%
Behavior	7.5%
Task Centered	6%
Clinical Casework	1.5%
Reality Orientation	1.5%
Group Work	---

theoretical perspectives understood by most students in practicum. Note that group work was not recognized as providing a base perspective for students.

A concern of both academic and agency related to the preparation of students for the practicum. Fifty-seven percent felt the students were indeed prepared for the practicum and generously listed 10 areas reflecting their preparation (Table 6). Interview skills, high motivation and previous work experiences highlighted these responses.

Although 18% gave no response to the question of practicum preparation, 25% identified 10 discrete areas which highlighted the lack of preparation (Table 7). For this category of responses the lack of theoretical orientations and interviewing skills (see the contradiction in Table 6) and writing skills dominated.

In looking at these dominant areas of deficits (Table 7), attention should be noted about the high response (46.3%) that could only be classified as "other" but yet undefined.

The 67 responding field instructors identified 24 distinct areas of knowledge and skill that students should have. These include a high priority of interviewing skills, knowledge of human development and behavior but a lower priority on personal psychotherapy and how to deal with confrontation by any angry client (Table 8).

Student Evaluation

A critical concern addressed in this study was related to the essential area of assessment of student performance. Field instructors

Table 6

Frequency Table: Identified Areas Where Student Demonstrated Readiness or Preparation for Practicum

Variables	Frequency
Interviewing skills	16.4%
Highly motivated	14.9%
Work experiences	13.4%
Counseling techniques	11.9%
Social work values	4.5%
Interpersonal skills	3%
Know intrapsychic processes	3%
Understand confidentiality	3%
Human relations skills	1.5%
Professional behavior	1.5%
Other	38.8%

Table 7

Frequency Table: Subject Deficit Area of Student in Practicum

Variables	Frequency
No theoretical orientation	13.4%
Interviewing	10.4%
Writing	7.5%
Assessment	6%
Communication	4.5%
Doesn't know how to use field instructor	4.5%
Little self-awareness	3%
Unrealistic expectations	1.5%
Can't take social history	1.5%
Only gives advice	1.5%
Other	46.3%

Table 8

Frequency Table: Suggested Knowledge and Skills Areas Required for Students in Practicum

Variables	Frequency
Interviewing skills	35.8%
Human development and behavior	28.4%
Communications training	22.4%
Family therapy	19.4%
Group therapy	17.9%
Systems perspective	16.4%
Basic assessment skills	11.9%
Individual therapy	10.4%
Ego psychology	9%
Psychopathology	9%
Social history	9%
Self-knowledge	7.5%
Crisis intervention	7.5%
Theoretical orientation	7.5%
Diagnostic evaluation	6%
Function as professional	6%
Personality theories	4.5%
How to use field instructor	4.5%
Model of helping	4.5%

Table 8 (continued)

Variables	Frequency
Aging process	4.5%
Mental status evaluation	3%
Alcohol and drug	3%
Psychology background	3%
Personal psychotherapy	1.5%
Confrontation by angry client	1.5%

utilize a variety of methods for monitoring student activities which provide a data base for both formative and summative evaluations. Of these, conferences, personal observations and tapes of activities and written recordings provided a maximal amount of data. It should be noted, in addition, field instructors found both student self-assessments and conferences with faculty liaisons useful in this process of assessment (Table 9). Field instructors also listed eight additional methods for monitoring students' performance (Table 10). Most of these emphasize some type of personal observation.

Given the methods and the degree of usefulness for monitoring students, it should be noted that 58 of the 67 responding field instructors felt they had sufficient information for valid assessments of their students. Of these, 54 felt they had an adequate understanding of the educational objectives of the practicum.

Role of Faculty and the School

Less than 50% responded to the inquiry about how faculty liaison can be more helpful. Of these, over 28% stated that faculty liaisons are helpful while the balance of respondents called for greater assistance from faculty on helping to define individualized educational goals, in being more accessible, on demonstrating knowledge of practice settings, and being able to assist in the integration of theory and practice (Table 11).

Many took time to call upon the School of Social Work to be more helpful to field instructors through personal recognition, and listening

Table 9

Frequency Table: Identified Methods for Monitoring Student Peformance

Variables	Frequency		
	Most Useful	Somewhat Useful	Don't Use
Conferences with student	85.1%	9%	0%
Observation/tapes	65.7%	10.4%	16.4%
Written record	49.3%	38.8%	3%
Student self-assessments	35.8%	50.7%	1.5%
Conferences with liaison	31.3%	49.3%	4.5%
Learning plans	23.9%	50.7%	11.9%
Other	20.9%	0%	0%

Table 10

Frequency Table: Field Instructor Recommendation for Monitoring Students

Variables	Frequency
One-way mirrors/video	19.4%
Peer supervision	7.5%
Group supervision	4.5%
Observing/co-working	3%
One-to-one observation	3%
Observing co-therapy	3%
Feedback	3%
Different learning plan	3%
Other	9%

Table 11

Frequency Table: How Can Faculty Liaison Be More Helpful

Variable	Frequency
Liaisons are helpful	28.4%
Assist in individually defined educational goals	7.5%
Accessibility	3%
Knowledge of practice area	3%
Integrate theory and practice	3%

to their suggestions. Also, key areas of student preparation, inclusion of basic course content and specific skill techniques were seen as means for assisting those who would serve as field instructors (Table 12).

A final section of this extensive survey called upon field instructors for random comments. Here the observations were pointed and direct by asking for faculty to have distinct competencies, to address the business of class content, and to be rigorous and have high expectations of students (Table 13).

Summary and Contents

The purpose of this study was to record observations about the practicum of the graduate curriculum of the University of Georgia School of Social Work. Information was obtained through a questionnaire sent to field instructors, associated with the School.

The analysis of the responses as presented in this report highlighted the interrelationship between practicum and the School's total curriculum. Furthermore, a review of these responses supported the rationale for this study--that those who serve as field instructors have an investment, a sense of ownership in the education of social workers.

The field instructors come from a variety of orientations, and with an obvious capacity for understanding the nature of students' status as they engage in the practicum. And there is the careful and extensive delineation of candid expectations on the part of

field instructors of the School and its curriculum in preparing students for the practicum. But these responding field instructors went beyond the basics of the practicum to explore the nature of the relationship between academia and agency and to clearly lay out a list of expectations to improve both the educational experience and this relationship.

The information as recorded must be viewed as candid and not critical. It sets forth with directness the observations of a cadre of those who teach without the formal recognition accorded faculty. What is missing is the possibility of differentiating the responses according to status (active or inactive) of the field instructors, their own educational background, years of experience both as practitioner and field instructor, and whether they reflect a clinically or organizationally focused setting.

This report presents the comments and observations of 67 social workers who have made an investment in social work. They represent a vital link between the agency that serves and the educational institution that would prepare those who would serve. The contribution of the field instructors to this study seem to be an expression of both gratitude and concern--gratitude for that which has enhanced the education, and preparation of students for the practicum, and concern about the gaps which delimit both the educational experience and the relationship between academia and agency.

Table 12

Frequency Table: How Can School of Social Work Be More Helpful to Field Instructors

Variables	Frequency
Provide field instructor recognition (ID cards, campus access as library, gym, etc.)	4.5%
More course content human development	3%
Have mid-year workshop for field instructors	1.5%
Require psychosocial assessments	1.5%
Listen to field instructors' suggestions	1.5%
More emphasis on content and administration	1.5%

Table 13

Frequency Table: Additional Recommendations for Student Preparation

Variables	Frequency
Hire faculty who have had clinical practice	4.5%
Counsel out students	4.5%
Intense follow-up of troubled students	3%
More integration of theory and practice in classes	1.5%
More case presentations	1.5%
Recognize that students can't read, write, add, etc.	1.5%
Other	28.4%